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Tilting Toward Baghdad: Gulf States' Aid to Iraq

An Intelligence Assessment

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Tilting Toward Baghdad: Gulf States' Aid to Iraq

An Intelligence Assessment

*Information available as of 24 January 1981
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

This assessment was prepared by [redacted]
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Top Secret**Tilting Toward Baghdad:
Gulf States' Aid to Iraq****Key Judgments**

The Arab states of the Persian Gulf are helping the Iraqi war effort because they hope a militarily chastized Iran will be less inclined to export its revolution and because they fear the consequences of antagonizing Baghdad. The aid is primarily in the form of loans, oil concessions, and provision of safe haven for aircraft and facilities for transshipping goods. It represents a crucial contribution to the Iraqi cause as long as Baghdad's ports are closed by the war.

Gulf rulers would like the war to end quickly with both sides weakened militarily. Gulf leaders see a rough balance of power between Iran and Iraq as their best protection against manipulation by either country, and they believe a clear military victory by either side would open the way for Soviet gains in the defeated state.

Continuation of the present military stalemate, on the other hand, carries several risks in their view. The war adds to domestic political tensions, disrupts the oil trade, deepens the split in Arab ranks, and risks Iranian retaliation against those states helping Iraq. Prolonged warfare, moreover, is likely to lead to additional Iraqi requests for help. Gulf Arabs might be able to stall Baghdad, but they have few alternatives to compliance.

Gulf rulers will, in any case, continue to pursue flexible, low visibility policies that maximize their options and preserve as far as possible an opening to better relations with Tehran at a future time. Some states, like Kuwait, may be able to translate Iraq's unprecedented requests for assistance from them into Iraqi concessions in other areas, such as resolution of longstanding border disputes.

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Tilting Toward Baghdad: Gulf States' Aid to Iraq

Gulf security following the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in the early 1970s was built on informal Saudi-Iranian cooperation. Security meant preserving the status quo, limiting outside intervention in Gulf affairs, and preventing Communist encroachment in the region. Iraq was isolated politically and viewed as a Soviet-backed spoiler intent on replacing the conservative monarchies with pro-Iraqi, leftist regimes.

Iraq, since its signing in 1975 of the Algiers Accord with Iran, has made a concerted effort to alter this view and to reduce its own isolation. Iraq's greatest success has come since November 1978, when it successfully brokered the first of two Arab summits following Egypt's rapprochement with Israel and the signing of the Camp David Accords. Former President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein, who was then Deputy Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, presented the image of pragmatists who were filling an Arab leadership vacuum caused by Egypt's defection and Saudi Arabia's weakness. Despite lingering mistrust, subsequent Iraqi efforts aimed at strengthening Arab solidarity were welcomed; they included improved relations with Jordan and the Palestine Liberation Organization, sponsorship of an eight-point pan-Arab charter calling for the elimination of foreign bases in the region, and a call for an economic program aimed at eliminating Arab financial dependence on non-Arabs. Gulf leaders viewed Iraq's ambitions to leadership in the Arab world, the Gulf, and the nonaligned movement as just that—ambitions that could be controlled and even used to moderate Iraqi behavior to balance similar ambitions elsewhere, and to wean Baghdad away from Soviet influence.

Impact of the War

The event that most changed the Gulf Arabs' view of Iraq's role was the revolution in Iran. It altered the regional power balance and destroyed the old, informal security system. It also led to more intense Iranian meddling in Iraq, thereby destroying Baghdad's rationale for signing the 1975 accord with Iran and

leading directly to war with Iran in September 1980. Gulf leaders watched developments in Iran following the Shah's ouster with growing dismay. Their concern over the failure of the United States to sustain a longtime ally was replaced by fear that clerical Iran would export its brand of religious revolution to their countries. Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait in particular experienced an upsurge in sectarian violence through the summer of 1979 as Gulf Shias were exhorted by fanatical Iranian mullahs to rise against their Sunni masters.

Gulf leaders became more receptive to Baghdad's warnings of the danger from Tehran and to the view that Arab states must unite against it. By mid-1980, Baghdad was seriously courting the Gulf states to further its own regional ambitions and gain allies against the danger from Iran.

Shaykh Saqr al-Qasimi, ruler of Ras al-Khaymah—part of the United Arab Emirates—did not discourage Iraq from a more confrontational policy during a visit to Baghdad in mid-September.

Two days later, Baghdad announced its abrogation of the 1975 accord and sent high-ranking envoys to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, and North Yemen to seek support.

The Early View

In the early days of the war, Gulf leaders believed hostilities would be brief and the objectives and damages limited. They hoped Iraq's "lesson teaching"

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would sober Iran, but they took a neutral public stance to avoid antagonizing the clerics in Tehran. As the war progressed, however, the rulers of the small Arab states began to give discreet financial and logistical aid to Baghdad. Gulf rulers privately were sympathetic to Iraq's announced war aims—control of Arab territory ceded to Iran under the 1975 accord, return of the Gulf islands to the UAE, and an Iranian pledge of non-interference in the affairs of its neighbors. Gulf rulers, however, maintained their public stance of neutrality.

What led the Gulf Arabs to favor Iraq at this point in the war? The answer is part hope and part fear. The war to some extent accelerated a development that had begun two years earlier with President Sadat's visit to Jerusalem. Gulf Arabs hoped that by supporting Iraq's pan-Arab initiatives then and in the current war with Iran they would increase their leverage with Baghdad and encourage future cooperation on regional and local issues. They shared Iraq's interest in presenting a united Arab front on the issue of Arab-Israeli negotiations and the future of the Palestinians. Several of the states, in addition, hoped to ease local tensions, settle border disputes, and end Iraq's attempts to subvert their regimes. The Saudis, moreover, saw an opportunity to encourage Iraq to put greater distance between itself and the Soviets, an aspiration shared by Jordan's King Hussein

Fear was an equally strong motive. The collapse of Iran created a power vacuum in the Gulf which Iraq would try to fill whether the less powerful Gulf Arabs wanted it to or not. Accommodation with and discreet aid to Baghdad was the preferred course, if it could be done without antagonizing Tehran. Gulf leaders also believed Iraq would score a quick and easy victory over Iran and hoped to avoid the Iraqi anger that would be directed at them if they failed to help.

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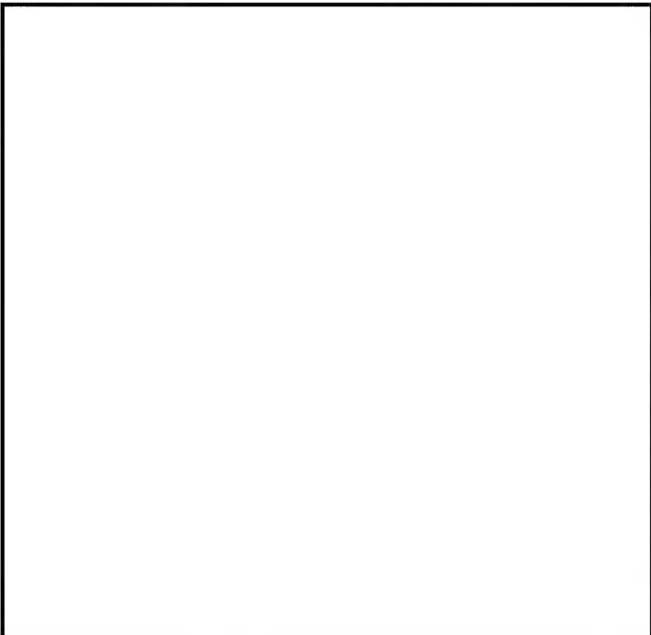
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Saddam is aware of the lack of enthusiasm some rulers have for his war with Iran and of their reluctance to break ties completely with Tehran. He is willing to overlook this lest he jeopardize the critical economic and logistical assistance Gulf leaders are giving him and further fragment the moderate Arab camp. Saddam is also conscious of the constraints that inhibit Gulf Arabs from openly endorsing his cause and seems satisfied, for now, with their official silence so long as it is coupled with behind-the-scenes help. [redacted]

Outlook

Weak and vulnerable, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf would like to avoid antagonizing either of their more powerful neighbors and would prefer a quick end to the war that leaves both Iran and Iraq weakened. They hope their discreet aid to Baghdad and the rounds of inter-Arab contacts that the war has stimulated will not provoke Tehran. [redacted]

Short-Term Consequences of the Tilt Toward Iraq

Saddam's ability to draw the Gulf Arabs closer to him has undermined the Gulf states' protestations of neutrality and drawn the ire of Iran. Tehran went from verbal warnings to military force in early November 1980 when its aircraft bombed the Kuwaiti border post of Abdali [redacted]



Despite the risk involved, however, Gulf Arab leaders believe their policy of offering Baghdad limited support has won them gains. Saudi Arabia and Oman, long concerned about Communist encroachment in the region, believe that moderate Arab support for Iraq is helping to wean Saddam away from the USSR and that he will be a useful ally against further Soviet encroachment in the region. They believe Iraqi aid could be especially useful in weakening Soviet influence in the Yemens. [redacted]

Gulf Arabs also believe that Arab support is moderating Iraqi policies toward their countries. Iraq has become less strident in its opposition to the Gulf states' relations with the United States. It had already been cutting back its support for antiregime dissidents in several of the countries—Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Bahrain, for example—before the war started. [redacted]

Iraqi leaders, on the other hand, believe the Gulf Arabs should be giving more help in the war against the ancient Persian enemy. They have pushed the Gulf leaders to endorse their war aims fully and openly [redacted]

[redacted] Baghdad has rejected Gulf Arab attempts to arrange a cease-fire, although it has endorsed a Saudi-Algerian-Arab League mission's proposal for Islamic Conference mediation. [redacted]



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Gulf leaders are also probably gratified by Saddam's conciliatory gestures to Sultan Qaboos of Oman. Baghdad had warned the Sultan over the past two years of the risks he ran in supporting Egyptian President Sadat's signing of the Camp David Accords and in deciding to permit US military facilities in Oman.

encourage radicalism in the Arab world and provide further opportunities for Soviet gains in the region

The Gulf countries traditionally have sought to balance the power of Iraq and Iran. Support for Baghdad's war effort earns Iran's enmity and jeopardizes this policy.

The war has had one further important positive consequence for the Gulf states—it has stimulated new interest in greater security cooperation among them. Gulf leaders were apparently not intimidated by the Iranian air attacks on Kuwait in November, but the war has made them more conscious of their military weakness and of the possible benefits of mutual security cooperation.

Support for the Sunni Arab regime in Iraq may carry a cost for the Sunni rulers of countries that have substantial Shia populations. Bahrain, whose population is almost 60 percent Shia, is particularly vulnerable to Iranian-orchestrated demonstrations against the regime. Kuwait and the UAE also have large minority populations linked to Iran by their Shia religion, Persian origin, or political sympathy for Iran's revolution. Saudi Arabia's Shias make up only 5 percent of the population but are concentrated in the vitally important Eastern Province. Shias in these countries and in Qatar are relatively quiet, mainly contributing money and medical supplies to Iranian religious leaders and relief organizations. Should Iran appear to be gaining the upper hand militarily, however, Gulf Shias could become much bolder and more aggressive in asserting their views.

On the negative side, the war is frustrating progress on important pan-Arab issues. Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states believe the Iraq-Iran war has distracted attention from what they see is the central Middle Eastern problem—the Arab-Israeli confrontation. The war, especially as seen by the Saudis, has added to disarray in the Arab world, making it all the more difficult to present a united front against Israel or apply pressure on the Palestinian question. Gulf Arabs fear Israel will successfully exploit Arab disunity and further delay addressing the Palestinian problem. They believe failure to settle that issue, in turn, will

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The longer the war drags on, the more unpredictable its outcome or the behavior of the antagonists becomes. The task for Gulf policymakers is to ensure that they can deal with whichever party emerges on top, while at the same time protecting themselves against an expansion of the war to their territory. That means keeping open channels of communication to Iran, as low a profile as possible on aid to Iraq, and a local arms buildup that depends on close but discreet security cooperation with the West, including the United States.

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